

Spring 5-10-2014

# Shadow, Skin, and Surface; Examining the Work of Viviane Sassen

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# SHADOW, SKIN, AND SURFACE; EXAMINING THE WORK OF VIVIANE SASSEN

by

CHRISTINA PRICE WASHINGTON

Under the Direction of Susan Richmond

## ABSTRACT

Viviane Sassen is a Dutch fashion photographer, whose personal work feature people from African descent. Through the employment of the equatorial light, her models' personal identities and faces are left in the shadow, their dark skin rendered "just" black, depicting the sitters invisible and without personal recognition.

In this thesis I offer an alternative to reading her work whose praise always stay on the surface; I examine her work in relation to the historical and geographical location, offer an analysis to the ontology of the shadow in photography, and examine the treatment of the surface of Sassen's models.

INDEX WORDS: Photography, Ontology of the Shadow (in Photography), Postcolonialism, Viviane Sassen, Hip-Hop and Visuality of Bling

SHADOW, SKIN, AND SURFACE; EXAMINING THE WORK OF VIVIANE SASSEN

by

CHRISTINA PRICE WASHINGTON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2014

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2014



SHADOW, SKIN, AND SURFACE; EXAMINING THE WORK OF VIVIANE SASSEN

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May 2014

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my family.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to my professors at the Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design, and I credit and thank the members of my thesis committee. Thanks go to my advisor Dr Susan Richmond has been patiently working with me throughout my (entire) stay at Georgia State University. I am grateful and like to thank Dr Kimberly Cleveland for an ongoing and regular conversation that helped me understand and relate to colonial and postcolonial discourse. I thank Dr Gyewon Kim for asking pertinent questions that advanced my thoughts and ideas in the matter of postcolonial and photography theory. Also, I am indebt to Dr Alessandra Raengeo who gave the inspiration and insight to think about the shadow in a new light.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Viviane Sassen (b. 1972) is a Dutch photographer, who has gained international attention through her fashion photography. She received her Masters education (fine arts) at the Ateliers Arnhem in 1997, after studying photography at the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten in Utrecht. In 2001 she began to revisit Kenya, where she had lived as a child. There she started an ongoing body of personal work that won her the Prix de Rome in 2007 and the ICP Infinity Award on 2011. Sassen exhibits around the world, and was included in the main exhibition of the 55th Venice Biennale, *The Encyclopedic Palace* (1 June - 24 November 2013).<sup>1</sup> In this thesis I will not make a distinction between Sassen's professional works as a fashion photographer and her personal work as an artist, as I cannot see much difference formally or in substance regarding her models, frame and use of light. However, Sassen states that she uses an analogue film camera for her personal work, while she utilizes digital devices for her professional work. This will later open up the discussion in my second chapter where the ontology and the surface of shadow and photography are discussed.

Charlotte Cotton defines Sassen as one of the “mere handful image makers to have truly informed and expanded fashion photography's lexicon, and that image makers are the timely visualizers of a cluster of militating factors within their epoch that give cultural meaning to fashion.”<sup>2</sup> However, the work of Viviane Sassen is in need of a deeper analysis within the visual culture in which it is recognized. Placing Sassen within the 100-year history of photography as Cotton does, I question Sassen's ability to expand the photographs fashion lexicon and her ability to change the way in which to look at photography. Sassen's work is beautiful in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> Addie Vassie, "The Double Life of Viviane Sassen," *British Journal of Photography* 158, no. 7792 (2011)

<sup>2</sup> Viviane Sassen, Nanda Van Den Berg, and Charlotte Cotton, *Viviane Sassen: In and out of Fashion.*, 266.

composition, arrangement and how she is able to play with the viewer's eye; she makes practical and effective use of two- and three-dimensional pictorial plane within an image that aid to disguise her models, a play that shifts our reading regarding the pictorial field. Nevertheless, descriptions and praise of her work always stay on the surface, and the geographical and historical location and context is ignored.

In contrast to these descriptions of Sassen's work, I am asserting, as Jonathan Crary has argued, that instead of focusing on the representation, the focus is situated on the observer and the historical construction of knowledge, thus making the observer part of a wider institutional, social, and technological relation. With the onset of modernity, philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic discourses overlapped with mechanical devices. The general reorganization of vision and historical construction was produced in which vision was discussed, controlled, and incarnated in cultural and scientific practices.<sup>3</sup> This was then followed by the development of optical devices, making photography only secondary to vision, aiding to any photochemical fixation and imagination that functioned to reinforce a subjective vision: "Ideas of things and events in the world were never copies of an external reality, but rather the outcome of an interactional process within the subject in which ideas (*Vorstellungen*) underwent operations of fusion, fading, inhibition, and blending (*Verschmelzung*) with other previous or simultaneous occurring ideas or 'presentation.' The mind does not reflect the truth but rather extracts it from an ongoing process involving the collision and merging of ideas."<sup>4</sup> This subjective vision was immediately incorporated into the new regimes of power and knowledge that was then justified, calculated and abstracted on the basis of the new discipline of physiology in the late nineteenth

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MA: MIT Press, 1990), 7-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 100 -101.

century. I argue that Sassen's photographs are indicative of this Foucaultian model of vision and subjectivity and that she complacently accepts visual codes and the necessary regimes of power that has formed the constitutional other. Her approach does not offer an alternative or an expression of criticism in relationship to Netherlands history, the history of art and the medium and history of photography. In performing race in front of her camera, her images allow the black body to be consumed utilizing the visual markers that places race and its history as a spectacle. Her work does not analyze the structure of thought within the content of photography and race; her uncritical valorization of the black body is the continuation of signifiers that organized vision and historical construction as scientific practices at the onset of photography and modernity. Looking at Sassen's work, I not only see a mere copy and repetition of early photography depicting the black body, or the constitutional Other; though the early version of photography was a construct of 'science' integrated into regimes of power and knowledge, the gaze from 100 years ago that capitalized on the exotic and stereotypical representations has not changed in Sassen's work.

Sassen relies on institutional, social, and technical conventions of representations and that she brings with her as a fashion photographer who was raised in Holland with the exception of a brief stay in Kenya as a very young child. Although Sassen's work is not 'ethnographic' work, her use of color and people in the photographs pick up familiar traits of the Benetton ads from the late 1980s. Oliviero Toscani adopted "United Colors of Benetton" in 1985 as a recurring trademark of the Benetton ideology.<sup>5</sup> Sassen's coming of age in Amsterdam could not have escaped the Benetton's moral high ground ads campaigns. An idea of initiating people of lower

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<sup>5</sup> Henry A. Giroux. "Benetton's 'World without Borders': Buying Social Change," in *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society and Social Responsibility*, ed. Carol Becker (New York: Routledge, 1994). Accessed November 22, 2013. <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/o/obriene/art7/readings/benetton.htm..>



developed countries in their ad campaign to play with the idea of equality, Benetton inadvertently raised many questions about the rise of the brand's recognition in a global market place. The photographer (Oliviero Toscani) was well aware of the relationship between representation and power, not to mention his own role in giving a twist to the advertisement of commodities as cultural signs in order to promote a particular system of exchange.<sup>6</sup> A photograph depicting a black woman [the frame of the camera cuts at the neck, leaving the face of the subject out] breastfeeding a white baby caused the company to withdraw several ads from publication in the US market in 1989, due to its provocative nature. However, Benetton's presence in the global market in conjunction with the controversial image campaign of the above mentioned photograph facilitated Benetton's advertising history to win the most highly awarded prize, receiving acclaim in France, Holland, Denmark, Italy and Austria.<sup>7</sup>

In order to contextualize Sassen's photographs within their historical and geographic location, the first chapter will talk about the Netherlands' decolonization process that leads then to a post-colonial discussion concerning the stereotype of the black African. The imbrication of ethnographic photography and race resulted in a photochemical fixation that fostered an imagination that is directly related to the production of the stereotype and how we recognize social identities today. To function, the stereotype is in constant need of repetition and never delivers an alternative reading. The photograph of the black body traverses histories, politics, and cultural discourses that cannot be ignored or hide under the veneer of beauty. Sassen's photographs recirculate and mimic old ideas that preserve histories and power relations. She has accumulated a great deal of attention of which none voiced any critical reflection. This thesis

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<sup>6</sup> Giroux, "Benetton's 'World without Borders'".

<sup>7</sup> Julie Hatfield, "Kissing Nun and Priest Get Shocks," *Bangor Daily News*, August 22, 1991, accessed November 23, 2013, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=iK1JAAAIBAJ&sjid=mg4NAAAIBAJ&pg=4665%2C1834549>.

will stand as an alternative reading of Sassen's work; in opposition to praise, I argue that Sassen's photographs deliver a stagnant stereotypical image that speaks not about her models. What has to be considered is what is left behind; it is the photograph that is the object, which cannot represent anything but a stereotype.

The second chapter is concerned with the way in which Sassen photographs her models, as their identities and faces are placed in the equatorial shadow rendering her models as just black. I discuss the index of the medium of photography in relation to the factual trace of the object. A discussion of the ontology of the shadow questions the space the black model inhabits in a photograph. The shadow of a body signifies the presence of a body, but in the case of Sassen's photographs, she uses the shadow to mark a distinct absence of her models. The structure of the photograph's referral "having been there" is now a direct deferral of Sassen's models. Besides the indexical relationship of the shadow's referent, the photograph is the cultural and social sign, whose iconic and symbolic tensions address the cultural shadow that photography cannot evade.

When Sassen does not place her models in the shadow to obscure their identities, the sitters appear with an applied gloss on their skin. The last chapter looks at the treatment of the surface, and I investigate the effect of hyper-visibility in glossy skin, which I argue results in the disappearance of the black body. As light reflects off the sheen, it cannot permeate its surface and generates the restriction of sight. The phenomenon to glisten the skin can be found in the Hip-Hop culture that presents women as commodity. Inspired by Krista Thompson's essay "*The Sound of Light*" *Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop* I investigate the relationship of commodity representations and their relationship to Dutch 16<sup>th</sup> century oil paintings in which depictions of material objects emulated the behavior of light; the craft of

applying thin layers of paint gave rise to specular representations connoting status. With attention to commodities, the Hip-Hop culture embraced specular surfaces, creating a visual culture in support of their musical innovations; in the performance to be seen, prestigious and polished objects were presented that also included woman. This leads to the argument that the representational practices of the black body often has a spotlight on black athletes that reflect the branding of blackness; sheen or sweat fulfill the stereotype that indicates the black bodies are physically powerful bodies and those representational practices are then consubstantial with the allure of the high quality photographic print, in art photography as well as fashion photography.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, Sassen's work presents the continuum of the colonized black body and does not offer a critique in which imperialism continues to be reproduced in art. Her photograph made to serve her audiences that need confirmation that the black body has to be incomplete and never delivers a full image.

## 2 POSTCOLONIAL CHAPTER: REPRESENTATION, DIFFERENCE (AND POWER)

A color photograph *Kathleen* (Figure 1) by Viviane Sassen depicts a woman facing the viewer in a portrait like position. She is wearing a light blue blouse, her arm rests on a railing, and a half wall behind the woman leads the viewer's eye diagonally toward the upper right. The photograph is taken outside; a small high-rise of an industrialized area sits in the background. The overall chromatic tone of the photograph descends from sky-blue to a more teal blue, however the model's skin is disguised by a shadow that covers her head. The only unshadowed

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<sup>8</sup> Stuart Hall, "Kobena Mercer 'Reading Racial Fetishism'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon (London: Sage in Association with the Open University, 1997), 289.

skin is on her arm, and yet the viewer can also identify the model's skin color through the shape of her silhouetted head and close haircut. The silhouette, however, opens up a separation in the visual field that makes apparent that seeing is always in conjunction with what we know; although the subject appears visible as a silhouette, the viewer cannot see the features of her face. The model's face is left in the shadow, her dark skin rendered "just" black, delivering her personal characteristics as invisible but indicates her African identity. The identity, or the knowledge we have of her is only indicated through the title of the photograph, not the image itself. (Not all images bare the name of the sitters.)

This photograph belongs to the series *Flamboyant*, which was ultimately reproduced in 2008 into a book of the same title. An essay by Edo Dijksterhuis in this book introduces Sassen's work. Though the book has been sold out, Dijksterhuis's essay is reproduced on a self-promotional website, *Thisispaper.com*.<sup>9</sup> The introduction has a "preemptive" tone that embellishes the work while protecting Sassen's representation of the racial body from criticism.<sup>10</sup>

Dijksterhuis's introduction relates Sassen's work to the photographer's memories of Kenya where she lived as a young child and played with the patients at the polio clinic where her father worked. It describes her feelings of nostalgia that arose when she visited Africa for the first time in 30 years. Equipped with a camera, the resulting work produced in *Flamboyant* represents Sassen's new way of looking at Africa, and according to Dijksterhuis, acts to challenge the drawbacks of the complex reality of the Colonial past. He considers the technology of photography and its history as persistent form of domination, but ultimately leaves it to the viewer to interpret Sassen's work within the context of post colonialism. Dijksterhuis

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<sup>9</sup> Viviane Sassen, "Flamboyant," *Thisispaper.com*, the whole article, accessed November 17, 2013, <http://thisispaper.com/Viviane-Sassen-Flamboyant>.

<sup>10</sup> All following quotes from this essay will be from the website version, unless otherwise stated

differentiates Sassen's visual regimes from images that belong to the "flies-in-the-eye" category, which show people either happy in spite of hardship, as a loss of paradise, or the war spectacle as barbarism to be delivered to the western world as the uncivilized society. Those are the pictures everybody in the western hemisphere has encountered via mass media and are, as he calls, the stereotype.

He claims that while Sassen's works call into question these forms of representations of otherness, he reassures that hers are solely meant to empower the depicted subject. Because Sassen's models turn their back to the camera or are positioned in the shadow, Dijksterhuis explains, they are "cast as individuals who are aware of the ritual that constitutes the act of being photographed and actively participate in it", and that her models are passers-by and not professional models. He explains that Sassen is playing with racial identity, and she leaves it "symbolically" in the shadow. Aware of her occidental background, Dijksterhuis nonetheless challenges the critics to "dare to throw her the first stone" and reminds the reader of the hierarchical structure and unequal relation between the ones who are empowered to depict and those who are the object of their gaze. As Sassen is searching for her exotic childhood and the "ambiguities of reality", it is the viewer's decision to accept the challenge that constitutes the existence of others.

All of Sassen's images have one thing in common: dark skinned people are always disguised through a shadow or something is physically placed in front of the face in order to shadow and disguise them. Although visible, the models in Sassen's work appear as if people in the photographs do not only have a lack of personal identity, the viewer is presented something that signals to accept the exclusion of their personal identity while recognizing the fact of their racial identity.

Take another example, *Traveller* (Figure 2). The viewer sees a woman with dark skin standing with her back against a painted wall. The light appears to be noon. The pose reveals a  $\frac{3}{4}$  position towards the camera; her clothes are made of printed cloth, revealing her bare arms that rest at her side. On her head she carries her luggage that contains a big wool blanket and items inside a disposable plastic bag. The luggage is twice the size of her head, and it casts her face in shadow, so that the viewer can only see a black shape. The traveler is centered in the photograph, a shadow of palm leaves graze the left corner.

Likewise, *Faro* (Figure 3) is an image of a young woman who stands against a dirty and worn wall that enhances the photograph with visual texture. The whole scene is situated in the shadow with the exception of the top edge of the photograph, where the wall receives direct sunlight. The young woman has very short hair, which is like her skin and her pants that describe the effects of low luminance resulting in black. Her head turned towards the camera to reveal a  $\frac{3}{4}$  profile; her right hand rests on her hip. A white sleeveless cotton t-shirt stands in contrast to the rest of her black body, exposing the outline of her breast as the only signifier of her gender.

Finally, *Cardinal* (Figure 4) shows a person lying on a dusty ground; the location must be urban, as the ground includes pavers. An iron fence that is painted white and light blue frames the top of the photograph. A shadow of the leaves of a palm tree occupies the lower right hand corner and reaches to the center of the picture. The center of the photograph shows the legs and feet of someone lying on the ground. The feet and legs are bare and dusty, blending into the ground. The person's short pants are barely visible as they blend into the ground that is contrasted with the harsh shadow of the palm leaves. The torso shows a red shirt, but is highly fragmented due to the density of the shadow. The head and arms are not visible at all.

The Work of *Flamboy* was shot in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia; in 2012

Sassen traveled for the first time to Surinam, a former Dutch colony. While in Surinam she explains that she relates to the people in Surinam through strange “lines of faith which tied together my own history and theirs, in the form of our mutual connections to Africa and the Netherlands.”<sup>11</sup> Sassen’s decision to photograph in Surinam follows the sentiment of the Netherlands that considered the Afro-Surinamese (man) as the most ‘different’ and ‘exotic’ one could get.<sup>12</sup>

I believe that it is important to look at the de colonization process of the Netherlands in order to understand the Dutch social, cultural and politic landscape that will set the parameter in which Viviane Sassen was not only brought up, but what she brings with her as her mindset is located within the Dutch culture. Historical scrutiny is crucial here as language and approaches are often obtained from African-American discourse, but neither slavery nor the post emancipation history was or is uniform. US race relations should not be taken as a generalized Atlantic model for history or its contemporary political and psychological record since it is historically a unique case.<sup>13</sup>

In comparison to France or the UK, the Netherlands was relatively late in acknowledging its role and responsibility in the international slave trade, and fragments of an existing consciousness that the Netherlands was once an important colonial power run parallel to the

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<sup>11</sup> "Suriname Dreams," [Http://www.nowness.com/](http://www.nowness.com/), September 22, 2013, accessed January 22, 2014, <http://www.nowness.com/day/2013/9/22/3313/suriname-dreams>.

<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Laarman, "Representations of Post-colonial Migrants in Discussions on Inter-marriage in the Netherlands, 1945-2005," in *Post-colonial Immigrants and Identity Formations in the Netherlands*, ed. Ulbe Bosma (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 67.

<sup>13</sup> Gert Oostindie, "History Brought Home: Post-colonial Migrations and the Dutch Rediscovery of Slavery," in *Post-colonial Immigrants and Identity Formations in the Netherlands*, by Ulbe Bosma (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 170.

efforts to integrate the history of slavery into the Dutch historical canon.<sup>14</sup> What is missing in the Dutch case is the ambition to achieve an overarching theoretical perspective on its colonial legacy.<sup>15</sup> In spite of the fact that Post-colonialism as an academic trend has made progress in the USA, Australia, Latin America, India and even Indonesia, the Netherlands has had only a relatively small circles of intellectuals engaged in this debate, and a sense of a Dutch colonial academic tradition gravitates heavy to the literary fields.<sup>16</sup> It concentrates on Dutch novelists writing immigrant literature, literature that has sold to the tens of thousands of copies, however their work did not advance any post colonial debate. In spite of their often politically powerful messages, those books have become part of the Dutch literary tradition and treated just as literature.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to the Indische Netherlands, the Dutch distinguished western from non-western immigrants. The connotation of 'Western' did not necessarily express the direction as opposed to 'East' as 'Western' is not used in a strictly geographical sense, but as a way of measuring distance from Dutch mainstream culture.<sup>18</sup> While Dutch colonialism in Asia evokes mixed memories, Dutch Caribbean history is equated mainly with slavery, and thus associated with shame. The Netherlands still prides itself on one side with its geopolitical context through

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<sup>14</sup> Ulbe Bosma, "Why Is There No Post-colonial Debate in the Netherlands?," in *Post-colonial Immigrants and Identity Formations in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 193.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 202

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 207 -208

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 209

The Historical and literal production finds its inspirations in the colonial past and the post colonial present is sitting on coffee tables, not fueling debates. Its attraction lies in its exoticism or even outright orientalism.<sup>17</sup> Set against the background of a worldwide sentiment of anti-colonialism, the Netherlands has not participated in any wider postcolonial debate,<sup>17</sup> while Postcolonial theory draws upon key ideas and concepts identifying colonial struggles. Dutch's colonial history and its de colonial process differ with each colony and period in which took place.

<sup>18</sup> Pamela Pattynama, "Cultural Memory and Indo-Dutch Identity Formations," in *Post-colonial Immigrants and Identity Formations in the Netherlands*, by Ulbe Bosma (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 192.



which the Netherlands has been the ‘pioneers’ of globalism, but on the other side indicates a sense of discomfort regarding colonialism.<sup>19</sup> A series of postcolonial migrations into the Netherlands at the end of World War II that ended the Dutch empire was followed by the first chapter of the decolonization of Indonesia and seemed almost insignificant, while the transfer of sovereignty to Surinam led to a mass departure that involved citizens of all classes and ethnicities.

Only since the 1990s have the Dutch government and public institutions been improving initiatives to remember Atlantic slavery, and Holland reveals the urge to accept Atlantic slavery as part of Dutch history in spite of colonialist perspectives that still exist. The Dutch’s practice to silence the past is one of many concepts that are needed to understand slavery and its legacies of all the complexities of a wider Afro American experience.

In this context, ideas of interaction between immigrants and (white) Dutch citizens were absent.

Looking to Sassen’s work as well as her elusive intention as an author, I find that her work is the product of a general flatness and ambiguous articulation, emerging out of a need to create an easy image for consumption, but that is still, like early European colonization practices, at the expense of the ethnic black body. It appears as if the management of difference has really managed not to make a difference that is resulting in the appearance of ethnicity, making subjects meaningless again. *Kathleen* (Figure 1), for instance, is photographed as if it is to represent a portrait. But the viewer cannot recognize her facial features, and must instead rely on what s/he already knows about “black” subjects. Kathleen is a silhouette and the gestalt of an ethnic black person, whose personal identification cannot go deeper. The viewer can only

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19 Gert Oostindie, "History Brought Home: Post-colonial Migrations and the Dutch Rediscovery of Slavery," in *Post-colonial Immigrants and Identity Formations in the Netherlands*, by Ulbe Bosma (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 157-158.

assume Kathleen to be female. Sassen's photographs objectify the black person. The tendency to generalize about the members of a certain group and to assimilate them to a singular identity is an action that fixes and reduces identity, as it ignores biological characteristics or historical origins that would articulate any diversity. It neglects the fact that people have multiple dimensions to their identities, in which they may resist one over the other. Race or gender may override each other, but who has the power to say?<sup>20</sup>

By photographing and representing her models, Sassen appears to promise an exchange not only between the model and the camera, but also between the model and the viewer of the resulting photograph. However, the final presentation is an abstraction of a person and that speaks to the reduction of her sitter as someone whose cultural and historical identity can be narrowed. Kathleen's face is flattened out, the fullness of her face is taken away, and the facial features are not recognizable. Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of the Ethics of the Other<sup>21</sup> is based on the encounter with another and that a face to face encounter discloses the other's weakness and mortality.<sup>22</sup> Face to face encounters are the foundations to relationships and the beginning point of the lived experience; the relationship is in the lived experience incomprehensible and therefore is, in Levinas' argument, an infinitive experience. It is the face that shows that one is different and that this opposition defines who one is, and the totalizing of the other needs to be avoided. Representational intention "determines" the other as it confers a

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<sup>20</sup> David Buckingham, "'Introducing Identity.'" *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, *The MIT Press*, 2008, 7, doi:10.1162/dmal.9780262524834.001.

<sup>21</sup> "Other" in Levinas' articulation is not the *constitutional other*, but has to be seen as the encounter with one another.

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey W. Murray, *Face to Face in Dialogue: Emmanuel Levinas and (the) Communication (of) Ethics* (Dallas, Tex: University Press of America, 2003), 78-87.

meaning to it, assigns it and recognizes its place in an intelligible order.<sup>23</sup> As Sassen photographs and obscures faces, she compromises the lived experience of an encounter with the other.

In *Techniques of the Observer* Jonathan Crary makes the argument that it is the mindset that is located within a culture that ultimately expresses its ideas and ideology. The photographic work of Viviane Sassen reflects attitudes of the Netherlands and (its former) regimes of power. Her photographs are her creations, a position that mirrors the Dutch attitude reflecting identification that the Indische Netherlands was a Dutch creation. The photographs are Sassen's creations in which she employs models, and refers to individuals in her photographs as sculptures<sup>24</sup>, but the people in her photograph are represented as the "cultural other", not as individuals. The position of self and 'other' in Sassen's case is apparent as she is the photographer occupying an active role by taking the photograph; as a photographer, her travels to the locations are encoded with the "normative" practice of travel that has a relationship with early photography and European travel (that has particular saliency in post colonial context), and making decisions on a "newness" in the photographic practice that authorizes an engagement with spaces of alterity. Sassen is not an ethnographic photographer, but she travels and enters foreign countries to photograph ultimately mimicking early ethnographic photographers who brought with them their subjective vision; she, like ethnographers, constructs her photographs with her models using their ethnic identities that are the product of historical forces to deliver the exotic, but ignores that ethnic identities essentially are the product of social action. Finally, as the expert camera operator, she utilizes a realist backdrop that stands in contrast to [the passive role

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<sup>23</sup> Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 56-57.

<sup>24</sup> Addie Vassie, "The Double Life of Viviane Sassen," *British Journal of Photography* 158, no. 7792 (2011): pg. #, accessed November 17, 2013, Art & Architecture Complete. & Viviane Sassen, "Flamboyant," *Thisispaper.com*, section goes here, accessed November 17, 2013, <http://thisispaper.com/Viviane-Sassen-Flamboyant>.

of] the people she photographs, as they are the onlookers, reduced to a minimal diagram of an optical anatomy. The camera positions them into the colonial schema that does not require personal identity.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to Crary's perspective that a mindset is located within a culture as a collective conscious that express ideas and ideology, Nicholas Mirzoeff's "*Right to Look*" examines the role of "visuality" in modern history and how authority (or the photographer) self-authorizes by envisioning itself with a historical perspective; the worldview of an authority seeks to naturalize and aestheticize its perspective in the classification and organization on the social order.<sup>26</sup> Mirzoeff focuses on the dynamic and the fragile relations between the "right to look" (the colonized) and the "power to look" (the colonizer). Imperial visuality shaped ideas about the "civilized" and the "primitive," as a prerogative means of ordering power. It understood history to be arranged within and across time, meaning that the civilized were at the leading edge of time, while their "primitive" counterparts, although alive in the same moment, were understood as the living past.<sup>27</sup>

Sassen, by virtue of being the camera operator, produces a reality formed by her perception utilizing heuristic strategies readily accessible. Imbedded within the personal and fashion work and its aestheticization, Sassen's photographs not only conceal the people's face, racial and gender identity, but the relation of who has the right to look. Sassen's photographs imitate the behavior and attitudes of a country that once was the colonizer. The resulting image is

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<sup>25</sup> Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 203-211.

<sup>26</sup> Sara Blaylock, "The Right to Look," *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, ISSN 1097-3710, January 2013, accessed January 14, 2014, <http://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/portfolio/the-right-to-look/>.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 196.

the fragile mediation of looking and seeing; the audience is not seeing the photograph, but looking at what it represents, which I argue is the manifestation of a Dutch post colonial attitude. It is the imitation of the real world process and systems of the Dutch globalization as pioneers by simulating the circumstance that reveal people as the object. Although the black model is standing in front of Sassen's camera and returns the gaze in that moment, the model's direct look to the camera does not challenge the gaze of the artist; it plays on the active/passive tension of seeing/being seen, but any potential disruption is contained by the underlying work of the stereotype.<sup>28</sup> The model may claim the autonomy to look (back), or Sassen operates under the framework to give her autonomy, but shifts in authority do not take place beyond that moment the photograph is taken. Authority lies in the photograph and how it lives in the world. In the event that Sassen does not strictly adhere to the notion of post-colonial continuity, her images are a subscription to the point of view that contemporary Dutch multicultural society is in many – often-invisible – ways connected to the past history of Dutch colonization in South-East Asia and the Caribbean. The Dutch are post-colonial without realizing it and without accepting newcomers from the colonies as agents in the national historical narrative.<sup>29</sup>

The photographs are not a copy of the real, but become truth in their own right. Sassen's ability to photograph requires mobility to be seen; consequently Internet, fashion editorials, gallery representation and the production of her coffee table books are brining history home confirming the imagination and memories of both, the colonizers and the colonized. The images made by Sassen do not represent the person in front of her camera, but rather what emerges is the

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<sup>28</sup> Stuart Hall, "Kobena Mercer 'Reading Racial Fetishism'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in Association with the Open University, 1997), 288.

<sup>29</sup> Ulbe Bosma, "Introduction: Post-colonial Immigrants and Identity Formations in the Netherlands," introduction to *Post-colonial Immigrants and Identity Formations in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 14.

moment the photograph is taken and what it leaves behind. The photographs become the substance, and are not representing the subjectivity of her models.

Photography's history is intrinsically linked to the edification, inscription, and sealant of race onto the skin. Black-and-white photography and its relation to the photographed black subject appears in *The Lived Experience of the Black Man* in "Black Skin, White Masks" by Frantz Fanon; he declares that "the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye."<sup>30</sup> The "preparation with a dye" marks the beginning of photography; the medium was referred to as "black art" given that the collodion used to produce photographs would stain fingers black for a prolonged time. The racial metaphor persists even with the advent of color photography.<sup>31</sup>

The process of "fixation," is tied to the making of the photograph, in which silver halide crystals suspended in gelatin exposed to light create the photograph. Chemical development engenders the reaction of the latent light protons and the silver halide crystals and lastly the process has to be fixed in order to halt any further development and the negative can be viewed (in light). This last step, fixing the negative, has been understood to visually see the "the having been there"; however, this did not only fix the film, but it also fixed the image, a kind of petrification of time. Photography in the colonial context acted and in semiotic terms still acts as an unbreakable bond between sign and referent. I described an image state, and as Raengo explains, Frantz Fanon provided suggestions for a theory of what photography may have represented; he linked the imbrication of the technical and social network at the moment in which he was suspended recognizing his epidermal racial schema (Look! A Negro!) and situated this in relation to the

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<sup>30</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89.

<sup>31</sup> Carol Mavor, "Black and Blue The Shadows of Camera Lucida," in *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, by Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 215.

chemical photographic process, “the Other fixes me with his gaze...the same way you fix a preparation with a dye”.<sup>32</sup> Later, as the medium advanced, the development of photography in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century served a host of orders that helped to qualify and exercise power on the body of the individual and the social body.<sup>33</sup> Photography became the prime locus in the performance of the racialized index.<sup>34</sup> According to John Tagg, photography has no identity and its status as technology varies in the power relations that invest in it.<sup>35</sup> The process of production, reproduction and circulation shapes the meaning of a photograph.

Colonialism is often thought of as a phenomenon of the past. Homi K. Bhabha explores the concept of “fixity” as a sign of cultural, historical and racial difference, and the concept of the stereotype is a major discursive strategy.<sup>36</sup> Stereotyping is a signifying practice that utilizes the construction of “otherness” and subsequently their exclusion. A stereotype receives a few simple easily recognized characteristics of a person that either exaggerate or simplify him. After that, the stereotype deploys a “splitting”, that divides the normal from abnormal, able to exclude everything that does not fit and is different.<sup>37</sup> From the onset of photography, the photograph was a tool that could fix meaning; its production, reproduction and circulation ultimately reiterate that colonialism is not just located in history. Imperial use of photography and ideas of race became

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<sup>32</sup> Alessandra Raengo, "Reification, Reanimation, and the Money of the Real," *World Picture , Distance* 7 (2012): 2-3, accessed August 2013, [http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_7/Raengo.html](http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_7/Raengo.html).

<sup>33</sup> Greg Hainge, "Unfixing the Photographic Image: Photography, Indexicality, fidelity and Normativity," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5 (October 2008): 720-721, accessed March 15, 2014, EBSCOhost.

<sup>34</sup> Coco Fusco, "The Shadow and the Substance: Race, Photography, and the Index," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*: (New York: Abrams, 2003), 111.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 111

<sup>36</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 94.

<sup>37</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in Association with the Open University, 1997), 257-260.

imbricated as race and photography engendered power structures and a binary view of Western art in relation to non-European civilizations. Thus, colonialism stands in direct relationship to the photochemical fixation and imagination. Examining Sassen's work, I also cannot help seeing Homi K Bhabha's work *The Location of Culture* as a textbook represented pictorially.

Consider *Kathleen* (Figure1) from the series *Flamboyant*, in which the woman's head is silhouetted although not lit from behind. The silhouette has relatively little information and can align itself with the stereotype easily. As a popular form of keeping and recording a person's appearance in the advent of photography, it is imbedded in our contemporary field of vision. Sassen's photograph of *Kathleen* is leading the viewer elsewhere, the expectation of a photograph is recognition of the person photographed. Sassen places the model beyond a photographically visible manner that now exposes to read the black body without the ability to see it, as it is a silhouette. Whether the work of Sassen depicts or represents race, it functions under the framework of the visual and visibility recognizing how race is signified and distributed. It is Sassen's articulation that "represents" subjects of a sub Saharan continent within a template of a gestalt, whose origin speaks of the advent of photography. Visual codes, indicated by the use of gestalt, constitute a paradigm of black and white ethnicity thus securing their referent to the practice of colonialism. Here I am concerned with the exploration of the stereotype. Through the form or gestalt of the woman photographed, we recognize her as a person with black skin without seeing the structure and color of her epidermis. Even as we can see her exposed arm, it becomes secondary to the reading of the photograph as a whole.

Recognizing the silhouette of *Kathleen* as an African person, it delivers to the viewer an image, a stereotype that has a sense of the familiar. We know it, it is arrested and a fixed form of representation. Bhabha argues that the stereotype is dangerous not because it mischaracterizes



the other, but because it assumes a totalized fixity of the image. Fixity becomes the concept of an ideological construction to signify the Other. In order to function, a fixed (Image) has to be constantly repeated, to arrive as the ‘stereotype’ that cannot change because it has become a form of knowledge and easy identification.<sup>38</sup>

The stereotype in Bhabha’s theory operates through ambivalence:

“The stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy [of colonial discourse], is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always in place,” already known, and sometimes that must be anxiously repeated...As if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved. It is this process of *ambivalence*, central to the stereotype...For it is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency: ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically constructed.”<sup>39</sup>

Today, a deconstruction of the colonial subject needs an articulation of difference.<sup>40</sup> Sassen’s photographs depict scenes that are manifested through the stereotype that is repeated in the use of the silhouette or other simplification in which we recognize the constitute other; hidden in the image is the currency of what appears “natural”, in conjunction to “racial purity”. Sassen disavows any difference and consequently poses her models as objects. The skin of her

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<sup>38</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 95

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 95

<sup>40</sup> Theoretical arguments of “difference” matters on linguistic, binary opposition, and classificatory systems among others; it is briefly addressed later how difference is the tool that creates ambiguity.

sitters, although concealed, are the cultural and racial signifier; though concealment of the skin is the license to disavow any responsibility, and in this way, Sassen can be purported to be color-blind. The result is a denial of the significance of race, color or ethnicity. Sassen's approach to photographing the other is a quintessential reproduction based on a set of orientalist classifications. The outline of the head that is rendered by a shadow is recognizable only because it itself has become a stereotype.<sup>41</sup>

Homi K Bhabha reiterates that the stereotype is a major discursive strategy and a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is in place and what we know. In need to be repeated, it also has been an arrested and fixated form of representation that is denying difference, thus constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in psychic and social relations.<sup>42</sup> The limitations that prevent the viewer a complete image of a person adds ambiguity that Sassen wants to create. It is this ambiguity and anonymity in relation to her models that extends into the stereotypical discourse. In creating art or a photograph, ambivalence is often sought out and wanted in order to make the viewer think about the image, or a situation; it also provides the basis that allows elusiveness. The question of "difference" and "otherness" have linguistic, social, cultural and psychic levels; difference is ambivalent, it can be positive and negative, and both are necessary for the production of meaning of the formation of language, culture, and social identities and at the same time it is a threatening site of danger, negative feelings and hostility towards the "other".<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Kara Walker is one example signifying the slave through panoramas as silhouettes.

<sup>42</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 95-107.

<sup>43</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in Association with the Open University, 1997), 238.

Sassen's work emanates from the Dutch condition of post colonialism that presents to an audience. The question arises whether her models are her audience. Her work appears to raise her models above a simple stereotype into a unique photograph, but not into a unique character. Utilizing the silhouette, her models are recognizable as members of African decent. If Sassen is criticizing the "fly-in-the-eye" stereotype, the question opens up whether a counter stereotype is produced with her work; ultimately this will become a stereotype considering the popularity of her work. Obscuring the models' faces forces the viewer to concentrate on the body instead; that confirms a making of the stereotype as the person depicted is reduced to the function and fantasy of her/his body. Mitchell quotes Walter Benjamin from the *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, "there is no document of civilization which is not the same time a document of barbarism."<sup>44</sup> One image called "*Spring of the Nile*" (Figure 5) shows a black female wearing a black dress sitting in a tree. The tree and the woman alike are rendered almost as a silhouette, facing the camera. The background is green grass that extends to the edges of the photograph. The woman and the tree look to be one entity. It is difficult to see where the tree ends and or the woman's body starts, the contours of both have the same (black) value. This conjures up the animal motif associated with Africanism. The aestheticizing of this stereotype does not break the illusion with the old stereotype.

As Sassen creates an image of the colonized and thinks that the image is holistic and pure, the stereotype "dramatizes the impossible desire for a pure undifferentiated origin";<sup>45</sup> the image functions, in Bhabha's explanation, that the colonizer expresses the desires to validate the

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<sup>44</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 154.

<sup>45</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 116.

created stereotype and wants to see a fixed object. The compliance of the model with the photographer is mimicry (a camouflage to hide behind harmonizing desires of the colonizer). It concretizes the ambivalence of the colonizer and the colonized; the colonial presence is always ambivalent, it is a split between its appearance as original and authoritative and the articulation as repetition and difference.<sup>46</sup>

Leaving her models personal identity in the shadow begs the questions of Sassen's relationship with her models. Do they see the resulting image? Are they Sassen's audience? What is the significance of the exchange to her models? Sassen does not want to participate in the African "Fly-in-the-eye" stereotype that lands on the coffee tables, but she too produces coffee table books in which she participates in the stereotype. Even in the event that she may create 'positive' images, it ultimately increases the repertoire in which the black body is presented that does not displace the negative image. Binaries remain in place and meaning continues to be framed by them.<sup>47</sup>

Sassen's supporting texts appear to describe (excuse?) Sassen to be a *tabula rasa*, and her work is the result of her subjective idealism emanating out of her dreams alone. But delivering rose tinted photographs does not produce an end of the imperial epoch that the Netherlands and

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>47</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in Association with the Open University, 1997), 273-274.

The age of imperialism is over replaced by globalism; photography may be the position of power here, but in our new world order, the photographs cum content have become the commodity. Freedom means freedom of commodities by means of infinite proliferation of consumer choices that is accommodated by an increasingly narrow range of political choice. Mitchell urges to ask what things we leave behind and considering the consequences for the real bodies and physical objects that remains. "The end of imperialism and the dematerialization of the object have both generated compensatory forms of nostalgia for the good old days of colonialism." W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 150.

many other nations are *currently* obsessively reflecting on. There have been numerous writings and reflections on the stereotype produced since WWII. Sassen arrives to the place of an imagined community from a modern experience of the western hemisphere, and produces photographs that move between cultural formations and social processes, creating rhetorical figures from the past that blurred in the advertising industries demanding easy images for consumption.

### 3 ON THE ONTOLOGY OF THE SHADOW

A photograph of Sassen's entitled *Shadow* shows a young boy in red polyester surf-like shorts positioned in the sand staring up into the camera (Figure 6). The boy is propping himself up by one elbow, the other hand is resting on his pelvis. The sand around him is bright. A shadow originates from the lower left corner up over the boy's torso and continues towards the upper right of the photograph. The boy's skin is very dark, and the sun reflects off the exposed portion of his skin, but where the shadow overlays the body, the light is so dim that it is difficult to see the sitter's face. The referent of the shadow is not in view, although it is recognizable that it emanates from the photographer Viviane Sassen.

The boy in the photograph occupies a passive role in the photograph. Not only is he positioned on the ground looking up to the camera, but also our reading of the photograph is from left to right, through the shadow whose referent holds the camera that looks down towards him. Out of curiosity, I flipped the photograph horizontally which resulted in a very different dynamic of the reading of the photograph; the boy is activated, the photographers' shadow seems graciously to offer shelter from the sun. (Figure 7)

Technically speaking, the photographer exposed the film for the bright light conditions and did not compensate for the dark skin that is in principal underexposed. Never the less, the photographer has the capacity to make distinctions considering the lighting conditions in order to avoid over or underexposure even in difficult lighting conditions. From here on the attention shall be on the original view (Figure 6).<sup>48</sup>

The discussion followed will describe the photograph and the indexical connection to semiotic signs, or the basic idea that the index is a sign that stands for its object by virtue of a physical connection. Signs represent how we get to know things. Every object relates to an indefinite number of other things, directly or indirectly. I will discuss the index on hand the photograph *Shadow* by Viviane Sassen; looking to Roland Barthes' idea of the trace as "having been there" as the index and the sign relation according to Charles Saunders Peirce will provide the framework for the discussion. It is my intention to address ideas of signification in the fashion industry, and lastly I will analyze Sassen's *Shadow* based on Victor Stoichita's *A Short History of the Shadow*. An analysis of depiction and meaning of the shadow, Stoichita's book teases out ideas of the shadow, and specifically myths of the origins of art from Pliny the Elder to our own century, in which the shadow was given malevolent meaning related to the idea of the doppelgänger.

Roland Barthes' concept of photography of "having been there" relates to the index by a physical and material connection to its referent. Light reflecting off an object makes an imprint on the film and presupposes its presence as it is photographed. Given the photograph's indexical claim, the shadow in the photograph "Shadow" produces an undeniable presence: its referent is

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<sup>48</sup> I am not making a distinction between analogue and digital photography here, as the idea of the index gets shifted, although scholars argue that digital photography also carry an index; a general fear of 'having lost the index' is a long discussion that simply does not have enough place here. Sassen claims that she uses analogue film while working as an artist.

the photographer Sassen. It resembles a “light-hue” silhouette of the photographer that produces tension as this shadow overlaps the boy’s body, thus creating a second “black” silhouette. The boy’s skin is very dark, and demands extra light for proper exposure. Where the two shadows meet, the skin of the black body is so underdeveloped, that the imprint of the boy’s dark skin in the shadow on the film equals virtually (literally) nothing, it contains almost no information; In other words, when holding a developed negative against the light, the boy’s features show the ‘clear’ cellulose, and the light sand is rendered dark. (Figure 8) The shadow is essentially an interception of light by Sassen’s body; the shadow represents the absence of light, technically a subtraction of light twice: once on the film, second on the paper. As light causes the chemical reaction, the shadow simply represents the absence of this reaction.<sup>49</sup> The photographer has the capacity to make distinctions considering the chemical reaction in order to entail registered information knowing that compromises and losses are part of the processes to yield results. Sassen is selling a shadow, cognizant of the limitations (or possibilities) of photography.

Considering Sassen’s shadow as she is actively covering the boy and the dominant presence of the image, she is the agent that cancels the boy’s features. Considering the skin color as a racial feature, the connection between the two bodies sustains a racialized reading of the photograph since the shadow of a Caucasian person claims an undeniable presence throwing her shadow onto the boy and eliminating his presence. The performance of the index in the Barths’s “having-be-there” has been put in play, and the shadow of the photographer marks a social and racial sphere. The photographer is dominant in the reading of the photograph, towering physically above the boy and thus ‘canceling’ him out. Delivered is a visible blackness that is often the metaphorical expression of race, and like the Photograph *Kathleen* (Figure 1), it is the

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<sup>49</sup> Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Negative-Positive Truths," *Representations* 113, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 22.

Gestalt and the delivery of black that carries the index of race, not the specific likeness of the bodies.

The photograph may challenge the way in which we see race not only in terms of the model's epidermis, but also in understanding the visual components that signify the social relation. I connect this relation historically to Sassen's upbringing in the Netherlands. I do not point the finger at the photographer, as this is merely an example of a social circumstance that post and decolonization is still actively incorporated into the Dutch discourse. The shadow created by Sassen points to the post and decolonial process and exhibits larger dominant social structures in the Netherlands that enforces invisibility of the black person in their cultural realm.

As the two bodies are fashioned in their interaction, a visual relation is revealed. The shadow lands on the black body and conceals the identity of the boy, while at the same time the photographer is represented indexically by her shadow. I am interested in the space in which those two meet, that results in a delivery of total blackness of the boy, the visible sign that the viewer sees. We can identify the moment of the making of the photograph, the positions and who takes an active role in the conception of this image. As a photographer, Sassen should be aware of the effect and result of this double shadow. Why did she intent to intensify the shadowing effect, rather to avoid it? Although the photographer is represented by her shadow, her dominant position marks the black boy unidentifiable. While the shadow of Sassen can be understood as the shadow of Dutch or colonial history, it is intrinsically connected to the history of photography and its shadow.

The shadows in the photograph connect the two bodies, but also keep an important proximity of the photographer to her model, signifying a deferral between both people and time. I make two observations here: the meeting ground of the two shadows has the effect that



resembles her consumption of the black body by dematerializing the boy, while the second point of recognition assumes that the historical contact continues to act upon each other at a distance after the physical contact of colonialization has been disengaged.<sup>50</sup> In indexical terms, her silhouette functions as the white normative body that “penetrates” or “eats” the black boy, leaving an evacuated index of him. There are two types of invisibilities going on here: one is the invisibility of Sassen, the other is the invisibility of her model.

Looking at the image, I feel a proximity to the boy as I am made to repeat the position of the photographer and the camera. But I cannot ignore the inequity between my position and the boy’s encounter. He is the one who cannot encounter us, the viewer, seeing him. In Barthes’ sense, we believe that he has been, the camera delivers an optical element of him, but it cannot make a registration of his face. The boy’s head becomes a shape not unlike the photograph of *Kathleen*, less an index but a two dimensional element of a composition. Sassen has used the equatorial brightness turning the index into shape, using her body to provide the shadow and delivers a secure and contained boundary of the boy’s body. In the photograph the body of the boy, at the moment where the silhouettes cross, is not in the body in indexical terms. Sassen’s body indexes a temporal presence on the film or the photograph, since her body creates the shadow that cancels the boy out; the shadow of Sassen’s has a point of origin that coexists with her body, thus her shadow is the referral of herself. Sassen’s shadow functions as an index of her body.

Existing in the same temporal space is the deferral of the boy’s body. Signified in the shadow of the boy (or the absence of the boy), a racial sign appears to inhabit in a state that is

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<sup>50</sup> Christopher Braddock, "Contagious Animism in the Artwork of Felix Gonzales-Torres and Dane Mitchell," *Drain*, 2013th ser., 10, no. 1, accessed February 17, 2014, <http://drainmag.com/contagious-animism-in-the-artwork-of-felix-gonzales-torres-and-dane-mitchell/>.

hollow that stands in opposition to representing its content, and as something that we can see through.<sup>51</sup> Seeing through can be applied in two ways: one that we could look through the negative, as there is no information; and secondly the meaning can apply to the idea that a Eurocentric vision offers to see the African race as one and the same instead of as individuals, not offering individual attention.

Although using color film, Sassen's work reduces the black body to a mono chromatic scale. This intensifies the relationship between black and white, marking dark skin as the epidermal signifier and as a marker of the Other. Relying on the distinct delivery of black contained in a racial gestalt, the continuation of the photographic reproduction of the black body is carried out as it has historically appeared.

To clarify the index, I set apart from Roland Barthes' association as the 'having-be-there' and the idea of the direct emanation from the real and Charles Sanders Peirce's social cultural construction that sets referentiality in relation to representation. An object exists and relates to a myriad of objects at once and over time. The temporal aspect is the 'having been there' by Barthes who feels a physical connection to his deceased mother looking at her photograph. Peirce later added, that a trace, as I described above, also establishes a method of classifications of signs; the index represents not so much the clear-cut 'physical' or 'existential' relation to the object. Images and language are composed signs that pose iconic, indexical and symbolic functions. On the one hand the object leaves an imprint (on a light sensitive surface), and due to the resemblance to the object, it enters into the iconic realm. This likeness of the object is now signifying or representing it. Peirce includes language as a sign that can represent the object [and

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<sup>51</sup> Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 21-33.

how it is represented is related to its object]. The icon functions on its appearance, while the index has a factual connection to its object due to its direct / indirect contact with the object. To define a symbol, systems within a culture are necessary to generate meaning.<sup>52</sup>

In *telling* a story, describing the deixis, images and text that can only be fully understood through contextual information in order to convey any meaning. The index enters a spatiotemporal realm when pronouns including “I”, “here”, “this” are introduced and become the contextual information, leading or pointing the deixis towards a direction, acting as a shifter. The photographic trace seems to harbor fullness; its detail is supplemental of meaning or intention. Photography as a dominant feature of media and mass culture changed the trajectory of the idea of the index; a moment, a person or object photographed can be detached and circulated without perceptible difference from its original time and place. The index describing deixis [detached from the point of origin] is empty and can only be filled by evolving situations.<sup>53</sup>

I read the shadow of the photograph *Shadow* as connected to the social and cultural geography of Sassen’s bias that produces the photograph. What is not seeable has to be articulated. The shadow in Sassen’s work is digressive and leaves the body of the boy empty and hollow; it is an effect [resulting in an affective response from the viewer] not only on presence and existence, but presence and absence. Eugenie Shinkle in *Uneasy bodies: affect, embodied perception, and contemporary fashion photography* makes an argument that biological registers of image perception play a significant role in the meaning of fashion images (that is not only restricted to fashion photography); perception of images has a special relevance to the

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<sup>52</sup> This is an absolute abbreviated idea of Pierce’s sign systems and the index; this paper will not go deeper into the theory of and knowledge of signs.

<sup>53</sup> M. A. Doane, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction," *Differences* 18, no. 1 (2007): 1-2.

photographic genres that trade on images of the body.<sup>54</sup> As I said in the first chapter, Sassen is a fashion photographer, and that I am not able to separate her fashion work from her personal work in terms of formal elements, locations, use of light and the employment of her models. Fashion photography has become a signifying system, through which social meaning is articulated. Shinkle makes the argument that analyses of fashion photography restrict themselves to the reading of images and by doing so risk to overlook nuances of meaning that are incorporated in the process of perception more broadly conceived.

As Sassen reduces the bodies in her photographs by placing a shadow over the models, I see the gestalt in view as an empty body referring first to the index of the film (the film is ‘empty’ of silver halide crystals). Combined with this reading is the association to an ‘empty’ signification of fashion photography. Employing her skill that emanates from the fashion industry, she creates an affect that is characterized by fashion photography that resists critique. Shinkle explains that analyses that ostensibly deal with semiotics and content analysis struggle to resolve interpretation with more visceral or intuitive, and less easily articulated responses to fashion photographs. Sassen’s reductive account towards her models assigning them towards a gestalt and disavowing their personal identity has a mode of representation of otherness<sup>55</sup>; it is the black body that is inundated with racial affect (meaning “Look! A Negro!”)<sup>56</sup> and that is manifested in the images as trace or index of processes and events that take place before meaning

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<sup>54</sup> Bettina Papenburg, Marta Zarzycka, and Eugenie Shinkle, "Uneasy Bodies: Affect, Embodies Perception, and Contemporary Fashion Photograph," in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

<sup>55</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 97.

<sup>56</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89.

is expressed.

As Alessandra Raengo describes in *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, Frantz Fanon has a critical response to the effect he experiences when a child points his finger at Fanon and calls him a Negro “Look! A Negro!” The scene describes many moments, but I will isolate the recognition that is akin to a “retinal pop”<sup>57</sup> that is produced by the sight of the black body. The arrival of a black body, and its precise naming exemplifies how reflection and introspection is prevented. Fanon is seen as an already-overdetermined signifier, namely “Look! A Negro”, which triggers and has an effect influencing the way the black body fulfills the need for a referential closure, as the sight of corporal blackness appears to always deliver “the black”.<sup>58</sup> The determined signifier of the delivered black promotes unambiguous and precise meaning (black), which becomes the tipping point to impact the viewer. Feeling secure in what one recognizes, it is the context in which subconscious decisions are made; taking culture for granted, it occupies a space that reveals emerging trends and thought patterns that effectively influence the representation of the black body.

Victor Stiochita has teased out ideas of the shadow; he explores the myths of the origins of art from Pliny the Elder to our own century, lastly leading to the shadow with a malevolent meaning as the idea of the doppelgänger. *A Short History of the Shadow* describes that the first act of representation in the Plinian tradition is the shadow. An event, the departure of a lover, inspired the first capture of the model by reduplicating it. The young woman who was to be left behind drew / traced / inscribed the shadow of her departing lover, creating a replacement for the

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<sup>57</sup> Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-16.

lover, and turning the absent present. While the real shadow accompanies the lover on his travels, the inscribed shadow remains a memento and immortalizes his presence. The shadow is an externalization of his being, and reduces the being into an appearance. This shadow is not ‘the body’; it is by virtue *the other of the same body*.<sup>59</sup>

The Platonic model on the other hand offers a counter paradigm: the reflection in a mirror is understood as the imitation, a copy of the image, not the trace. Plato differentiates between the shadow and reflection that occurs in the water or polished surfaces. Ontological different, the shadow represents the ‘*other of the same*’ stage, while the mirror represents the ‘*same of the double*’ stage. The Plinian tradition the image ‘captures’ the model by reduplicating it (such is the magic function of the shadow), in Plato it returns its likeness to it (such is the imitation function of the mirror) by representing it.<sup>60</sup> The theory of western cognitive representation is based on Plato’s concept of “likeness”, the function of the imitation or the mirror that now represents the *same in a state of double*.<sup>61</sup>

I would like to look at Sassen’s *Shadow* (Figure 6) and analyze the ontological differences of shadow and reflection, as both ideas are present in her photographs. The concern is the chronology of a ‘shadow’ and a ‘mirror’ stage that pushes the ‘shadow’ stage sometimes towards inferiority. Concepts of the image are in constant articulation, as Pliny and Plato speak of different things within different contexts, but both deal with the myths of origin. (Pliny with the myth of art and Plato with the myth of knowledge.<sup>62</sup>) With reflection or imitation, I refer to the

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<sup>59</sup> Victor Ieronim. Stoichitǎa, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 11-17.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 12-16.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 8.

resulting mirror image that was made in the camera. The cognitive representation based on Plato's concept of "likeness" is the imitation or simulation of the scene; the significance of Sassen's scene is difficult, as 'simulacrum' is also the '*skiagraphica*', an expression used by Pliny translated "tracing an outline of a man's shadow" thus a substitution and not in imitation.<sup>63</sup> The resemblance of the scene absorbs the projection of the shadow as the mirror stage chronologically follows the shadow stage.<sup>64</sup>

A very dark skinned boy positioned on the ground looks at the tool that is producing the mirror image of him, or the *same of the double*. The camera returns the likeness; such is the imitation or representation function of the mirror. Introduced in this photograph is the shadow that emanates from Sassen herself. The shadow represents the *other of the same* but at the same time it also represents *same of the double*, as the photographer's silhouette is created as a shadow but recorded in the camera's function akin to the mirror. The silhouette of Sassen competes with her identity, as the relationship of her identity slips into a relationship of *otherness*: on one hand, it is the *other of the same* (her own shadow), on the second hand, she aligns herself with the constitutive Other, the boy. Her shadow, now the '*other of the same*', is depriving the camera/film of the necessary light to produce the adequate reflection of the boy thus his identity becomes ambivalent as she has become, but in the direction that points towards empty or hollow. As Sassen is inserting herself into the photograph through her own shadow, her posture, arms and her finger on her right hand reveal that she is taking the photograph is now translated to an index and an icon (the silhouette of the active photographer). This is a classical mimesis that allowed the instrument of the act to be inserted into a pictorial statement, but only in the form of

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<sup>63</sup> *Umbra hominis lineis circumducta* - "tracing an outline of a man's shadow"

Ibid., 28.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 29.

a shadow.<sup>65</sup> The index as the factual connection to her, and the icon functions as the visual appearance that details its referent operating its own visual mechanism recording the scene [camera in hand/ the painter's hand].

The object of desire in the photograph is the skin of the black boy, thus the symbol as fashion photography has become a signifying system, through which social meaning is articulated; his skin that is fully exposed to the sun reveals the only specular reflection, thus confirming absolute exclusivity of the boy's skin. It is the light that gives the luster to the skin; the body parts in the shadow are flattened out. As Sassen focuses the mind on the skin's seductive quality (as it happens in advertisement) it appears that the specular reflection has more consistency or is more stable than the shadow or what falls inside the silhouette/shadow of Sassen; treating the skin as a "new kind of reflecting surface"<sup>66</sup> will be discussed in the following chapter. That Sassen 'represents' and 'empowers'<sup>67</sup> the black boy is an illusion as Sassen represents herself (via her shadow/silhouette/icon and index) towards the constitutive Other (the boy), but in fact, this displaces his identity as her shadow/silhouette cancels him out. Sassen who takes the photograph becomes the shifter and the pointed finger. She is the one taking the photograph pointing the camera in the path of her own shadow onto the boy affecting how he is represented. Focus on the black skin is analogous the pointing finger as Fanon experienced when a child exclaims, "Look! A Negro!" that at the point of recognition is reduced to the epidermal racial schema and its black color. Again, the arrival and recognition of a black body and its consequently naming as such prevents any deeper reflection of the body with black skin.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 198

<sup>66</sup> Viviane Sassen, "Flamboya," Thisispaper.com, accessed November 17, 2013, <http://thisispaper.com/Viviane-Sassen-Flamboya>.

<sup>67</sup> Viviane Sassen, "Flamboya," Thisispaper.com, accessed November 17, 2013, <http://thisispaper.com/Viviane-Sassen-Flamboya>.



Recognizing the signifier at the sight of corporal blackness reveals how Sassen (subconsciously) takes culture and its sign systems for granted, thus presenting her thought patterns that influenced her representation of the black body.

Sassen's self defining representation of the shadow is the '*other of the same*', captured by reduplicating it, is the imitating function of the camera. The boy is constitutively 'othered' [as in Orientalism], but is the '*same of the double*'. The boy does not produce his own shadow, but where the '*same of the other*' meets the '*same of the double*' the boy is not only absorbed by the '*same of the other*', but he is void of his '*same of the double*' and '*other of the same*' alike. The photograph/ imitation (Plato's mimesis) shows us by means of the medium/ camera that representation is static. But what we have here is the narrative that is integrated into the shadow, the diexis [diegesis]. It is telling a story through the shifter that is the pointed finger, (the shadow of Sassen) through which we enter the photograph.

Interestingly, that the frontal representation of Sassen's shadow follows the principle with the mirror relationship that is associated with the '*same state of the double*' while the profile has a relationship with the shadow stage.<sup>68</sup> The boy, the constitutive other, is black and is covered by the 'other' shadow created by Sassen. His position is frontal that represents the relationship associated with the mirror (phase), but the 'other' shadow of Sassen creates his likeness (the finger operating the camera) that reveals the black skin and essentially his outline of his head akin to a silhouette. To approach his 'likeness', the representation takes on the symbolic form of the profile. This Plinian iconography was the only message that the myth of the origins of art [of Pliny] was understood to convey; it maintained that only in the profile of the outlined shadow

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<sup>68</sup> Victor Ieronim. Stoichitǎa, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 41.

mimesis *and* Index (likeness *and* physical connection) could exist.<sup>69</sup> The “*Shadow*” however seems to distort what is on view, since the likeness of the boy is flattened through the shadow that crosses him.<sup>70</sup>

Photography is all about light and shadow. In Sassen’s work discussed here (and in many other of her photographs), the light is so frontal in relation to her camera position that her models do not seem to throw a shadow. Instead a shadow is created onto her models, revealing fragmented body parts or positions, or a hyper real body. This work is like fashion photography’s treatment of the body as a surface and does not elicit the desire to articulate critical response.

The questions of indexicality in combination with semiotics, the place of the shadow in Sassen’s work add nothing new to the visual culture. As I tried to separate the different spaces in which the shadow exists, I see some ontological challenges how to read the shadow, but at the end the viewer will stay on the surface, visually and in terms of visibility. The black body is a fixation and its photograph as a signification is in need for articulation more than ever; the separation of the seeable and the sayable in the shadows of Viviane Sassen will not be addressed if the perception of beautiful photographs function in a genre that trade on images of the body.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 113

<sup>70</sup> The light is so bright, that the boy does not produce his own visible shadow. The shadow of a substance or flesh is proof of an actual physical presence. At the age of six or seven, a child can already understand that the shadow is a product of a single object, and by the age of around nine the child realizes that the shadow is not a substance behind the object, driven away by light. To a child the shadow becomes synonymous with the absence of light.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, the shadow is the proof of an actual presence that a body is there. A shadow signifies a presence. As is the shadow, the very prototype of the irremovable sign.<sup>70</sup> I have to think of the story of Peter Schlemihl, who as a poor boy sold his shadow to a strange person for a magic purse. This story written in 1814 by Adelbert von Chamisso and Schlemihl’s fate has been recycled many literary stories from E. T. A. Hoffman to Walt Disney’s Peter Pan, in which the shadow of a person is gifted with an exchange value. Schlemihl’s shadow compares to the value of a magic purse that never empties, and the man in gray can pick it up. The moral of the story is, although Schlemihl did not trade his shadow back for his soul, the shadow functioned as the direct eminence of him or his body, but to sell your shadow is analogous to selling your identity.

Sassen utilizes the history of photography and history of the African Diaspora with a Eurocentric vision.

#### **4 BLING, VISIBILITY, COMMODITY AND SHINE ON THE BODY**

The photograph *Numerokinee3* 71 (Figure 9) centers a woman positioned on the ground; leaning back on her hands, the woman sits on her left ankle, while her right leg is extended towards the left picture frame. She looks down, her face not in view. She is wearing a little black strapless top and high waisted shorts. The overall hue of the photograph is copper, created by the combination of the reddish-copper earth, the woman's rose colored shorts and her red jewelry; the exceptions are the model's hair and her top which are flat black. Her exposed skin is dark, but it is covered evenly with a gloss that distinctly reflects light. In contrast, the matt earth around the woman absorbs the light and diffuses its reflection. A series of wavy lines is marked into it. Despite these markings in the dirt, the woman remains the focal point.

In this chapter I consider the production of femininity and the construction of the black body in *Numerokinee3*. I focus on the hyper-visibility of the woman's glossy skin, which I argue ultimately results in the disappearance of the black body. Here, the shadow does not obscure the skin, but the skin is treated with a surface barrier that indicates a different kind of invisibility. The light reflecting off the sheen cannot permeate its surface; the view is restricted at the precise moment when the light is reflected by the sheen.

I want to look at Sassen's use of shine on the black body that ultimately obscures the model and places it in relationship to Hip-Hop culture that utilizes the reflective surface to

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71 Numerokinee3 was printed in the magazine Numero fall/winter 2009. The model's name is Kinee Diouf, the name Numerokinee3 is, I believe, a default by the site. For purpose to identify, I will call the image Numerokinee3.

indicate commodity; the black female body in Hip-Hop culture is always represented in the currency of fungibility, indicated by glossy and reflective skin. Inspired by Krista Thompson's essay "*The Sound of Light: Reflection on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop*", I would like to take up her correlation with the surface leading to the idea of 'bling' as a constructive tool to represent the black body within a culture that engendered out of the music genre Hip-Hop. Credited with a number of musical innovations, Hip-Hop found a way to create and support a visual culture resulting in productions of self-representation. Bling as an optical effect operated in a space for participants to perform their visibility. Productions of visual manifestations that presented Hip-Hop sound appeared while young people moved in their car through urban space thus performed the effect of being seen. This publicized not only Hip-Hop music, but also the accompanying production of video and print media helped broadcast a visual culture [of an equally loud lifestyle]. Cars represented a commodity (instead a necessity of transportation), and appeared in high polished gloss; drivers and people in the cars accessorized not only in fashion and jewelry, but performed *to be seen* that emphasized ideas of self-representation. Ostentatious cars, clothing and jewelry became 'bling', imitative of light reflecting off them, or as Thompson writes, that bling refers to "the imaginary sound that is produced when light reflects off a diamond".<sup>72</sup> Thompson points out that while surface shine and bling create visibility, the precise moment of being seen transpires to the moment of being present. To make a photograph, the flash that corresponds with the moment of the exposure results in the record of the moment and the presence of its subject. The flash delivers the necessary light to register the subject on the film plane. Thompson argues that it becomes paradoxical considering that at the exact moment when light hits on a diamond or a reflecting surface, it is also the agent that obscures the visual,

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<sup>72</sup> Krista Thompson, "The Sound of Light" Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," *The Art Bulletin* 91, no. 4 (December 2009): 483, accessed November 11, 2013.

as this is the point of visual saturation;<sup>73</sup> in photography, the flash of the camera is blinding as it creates a brief moment of invisibility and absence. But this moment, in turn, is the moment in which the ‘subject’ is made into representation to be visually consumed and therefore seen.

Krista Thompson’s essay investigates the relationship of commodity representations and its relationship to Dutch 16<sup>th</sup> century oil paintings in which depictions of material objects emulated the behavior of light. To further expound the concept of (in)visibility, this paragraph will speak about the surface treatment of northern Dutch oil paintings, as new techniques of observations elevated the significance of material objects. While genre and still life paintings proliferated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, portrait paintings shifted to depict individuals as opposed to saints; in contrast to the specular treatment of expensive commodity goods, the human figure in portrait or landscape paintings had to be represented in the necessary subversive position to God. Skin of white sitters did appear with the specular glow and stands in contrast to the representations of slaves or black servants. This examination is relevant to the discussion of Hip-Hop’s renditions of glossy objects that places women in the Hip-Hop scene as commodities. It is the visual expression of commodification that ultimately returns to Sassen’s use of sheen on the black female.

Thompson analyses the surface aesthetics of Hans Holbein’s *Portrait of King Henry VIII*, calling attention to its depiction of opulence (Figure 10) Like the artist’s better known painting, *The Ambassadors*, Holbein’s portrait of the King reveals the material texture of objects within the picture plane as paintings in the 16<sup>th</sup> century fashioned power and prestige through material possessions<sup>74</sup> (that also included art). Dutch oil painters explored with perspectives and

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 482

<sup>74</sup> Ibid 485

techniques the effect of visually molding their objects with thin layers of paint, resulting in a new representational system that emulated the behavior of light of the objects. Materials such as glass and metals honed the craft and recognition to present precious objects simulating their reflective shine that was visually measured by their reality of specular reflection.<sup>75</sup>

Commodity value in Holbein's paintings are fixed and manifest through and by the manner of painting, and yet the skin of *The Ambassadors* and that of *King Henry VIII* do not produce the same glow as the precious objects. Exceptions in the presentations of bodies that have sheen are paintings of dark skinned people; *Moorish Bath* (Figure 12) by Jean-Leon Gerome or John Singelton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (Figure 13) to name a couple, and at the account of Charles Ford in *People as Property*; The Dutch painter Dirk Valkenburg was hired to paint for a Dutch merchant who owned three plantations in Surinam. Depicting daily life and scenery at the plantation, slaves as a commodity were presented with 'gleaming' skins.<sup>76</sup> (Figure 14)

A Holbein painting of lackluster white skin can be argued in two ways: The capitalist form of exchange of objects excluded the (white) human being, and signals the body to be a sign of imperfection in the eyes of God who is forgiving. Secondly, the painting's relationship with the gaze had to command a proper distance from which to view the canvas. The sitters seem aloof and stiff, the painter purposefully created a formal space to provide the necessary distance

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<sup>75</sup> King Henry VIII through new modes of representation did not only cultivate his image with his glamorous excess, but that he is also known for his six marriages, which is comparable to the women portrayed in the Hip-Hop culture who are (all) signified as a commodity

<sup>76</sup> The paintings themselves served to the master's ownership and his management of "cultivated labor". Those paintings modeled the collection of exotic rarities, initially associated with royalty but long imitated by the urban bourgeoisie as seen in the paintings of Hans Holbein.  
Charles Ford, "People as Property," *Oxford Art Journal* 25, no. 1 (2002): 8-9, accessed March 9, 2014.

between the viewer and sitter.<sup>77</sup>

Knowledge and power of representations that evidenced the optical illusion in and through wealth, as in 16<sup>th</sup> century Dutch painting, has the same visual discursive strategy as the Hip-Hop scene in the 1980s in New York; set against each other, they offer a 'brilliant' diversity, in which Hip-Hop appropriates the visual strategies of the 16<sup>th</sup> century paintings.

Looking at the representation of skin in Hip-Hop culture, it functions not unlike the representation strategies of commodities as in *The Ambassadors*.<sup>78</sup> Representations of females in Hip-Hop culture are treated with the same commodity factor as the precious objects in the Holbein paintings and are on par with the polished cars or all the accessories of the Hip-Hop culture that have a currency in the management of shine. At the impact of a flash, the light creates visibility, but the sheen of the skin or the shine of objects presents a disruption in the visual field, resulting in the visual oversaturation thus creating a barrier and a distance towards the viewer; both, the Hip-Hop culture and the 16<sup>th</sup> century representation of wealth, maneuver the politics of recognition in public that are mixed with the politics of personhood. Oil paintings in the Northern Renaissance mediated a connection between representations and represented in a new way, engendered out of the new class of connoisseurs and entrepreneurs that could hire painters as their agents to paint their possessions.<sup>79</sup> The Hip-Hop culture with the onset of the world wide Interweb (my word) and music videos found a way to create and support their own

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<sup>77</sup> The sitters needed to be represented with vigilance and distance since the then new emphasis on the individual presence was discomforting. In the case of the *Ambassadors*, the painting was produced for King Henry VIII and representing one's individual presence would posit equality but that was inconceivable.

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting, 1977), 97.

<sup>78</sup> Krista Thompson, "The Sound of Light" Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," *The Art Bulletin* 91, no. 4 (December 2009): 485

<sup>79</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting, 1977), 85.

visual articulation; Hip-Hop became the product of self representation. Predicated and tied to a commodity culture, black women are represented with a shimmering skin that obscured the view may suggest a distance, but I argue later that this is giving raced bodies' way to old stereotypes.

Sassen's strategies of pictorial representation of *Numerokinee3* (Figure 9) follow the principle to objectify her models utilizing visual clues that ascribe to the context of hyper visibility and bling. Sassen, who came of age in the Netherlands, was as much exposed to popular media and Hip-Hop as the producers of Hip-Hop found visibility in self-representation. Sassen's use of surface shine on black skin needs consideration as she makes a choice to take photographs of people of African descent treating their skin with a visible shine. It looks as if Sassen appropriates from the visual culture around her, but is unaware of the meaning of cultural signs as they appear on a continent that has embraced and makes attempts to reflect on its history with the Atlantic Slave Trade. Thompson ascribes surface aesthetics from the northern Renaissance oil painting to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Hip-Hop surface aesthetic. Appropriating shine and surface aesthetics that connote capitalism, power relation or a canonized way of representing taken from the Hip-Hop culture, Sassen produces and mirrors the denial of Dutch's (or European) engagement with the history of people of African descent.

Ultimately, Sassen utilizes representational practices of the shiny black body that conjure up scenes of chattel slavery; Saidiya V Hartman investigates of the slave narrative in *Scenes of Subjection*. Chapter one "Innocent Amusements, The Stage of Suffering" elucidates the staging of slavery that served as a spectacle and exhibition of "Negro enjoyment" that were intertwined with terror as slaves had to perform and match the master's expectation of the black body; symbolic reenactments of transforming slaves from free persons into slaves, staging jollity and coerced festivities of the slave trade indicated successful domination, management and power of



plantation owners.<sup>80</sup> The visual production of performances was a signifier of control and as important as the slave's display in the pen. Being on display encompassed greased faces and skin, dyed hair next to dancing and grinning. As skin was shined in the slave pen, it functioned to cover up markings and signs of rebellion that contradicted with performed servitude, as slaves were visually inspected before a purchase. Bodies with shine increased the slave's value; the shine covered not only the slave skin's imperfection, but served to "blind" the buyer.<sup>81</sup>

The visual display of power dynamics, the performance of slaves and the practice to elevate the black body as commodity (to blind potential buyers) reflect the attitudes performed within Hip-Hop culture. Visual representations of Hip-Hop culture reference social constructions of power in which interactions with women mirror the dominant behavior of the master–slave dynamic. Secondly, as the slave was forced to perform his role to be subservient to his "owner", he also was forced to shine his body that ascribed to their master's view that a shiny surface connoted not only commodity, but it could erase the unfamiliar (other black body) into something concrete. I argue that this was a social representation, as the glossy black skin was the process to anchor meaning onto object to integrate it into the then existing worldview. The slave's (social) construction engendered out of a (social) representation that converted into a (social) reality that, like the stereotype, has to be continuously be reinterpreted, rethought and represented. Given this dynamic, Hip-Hop culture has picked up this dynamic, highlighting (but not problematizing) the terms of objectification by transferring and presenting the female black

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80 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23.

<sup>81</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 39.

body as commodity. Hip-Hop culture capitalizes on the marketability and commodification of the black stereotype.

A discussion of visual figuration and popular representational practices of the black body often has a spotlight on black athletes that reflect on branding of blackness, but perhaps function to neutralize a lack of intellectual power and opportunity.<sup>82</sup> It is well established that sport is one of the few areas where black people have had outstanding success.<sup>83</sup> Thus, representations of the black body in which sweat on skin is photographed in harsh light translates to 'shiny surface' reflect conditions of imaging the black body, as it suggests the physical exertion of powerful bodies. Kobena Mercer in *Reading Racial Fetishism* suggests that the shining surface of the black skin serves several functions in its representation; he compares the representations to the black boxer who always glisten like bronze in the illuminated square of the boxing ring, or, in pornography, as it suggests intense sexual activity 'just before' the photograph was taken. Specular brilliance of black skin is bound in a double articulation as a fixing agent for the fetishistic structure of the photograph. The shiny, polished sheen of black skin becomes consubstantial with the luxurious allure of the high quality photographic print in art photography as much as in fashion photography, the 'glossies'. This double slippage makes black skin and print surface bound together to enhance the pleasure of the white spectator."<sup>84</sup> The production of

*Numerokinee3* is an editorial layout for the French fashion magazine *Numero*, connoting a

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<sup>82</sup> Stefan Lawrence, On White Men's Representations of 'race', Whiteness, Masculinities and 'Otherness': A Critical Race Study of Men's Magazines, Racialisation and Athletic Bodies, January 2013, Seen but not heard: Exploring media representation of black masculinities, accessed October 18, 2013, [https://www.academia.edu/4578807/On\\_white\\_mens\\_representations\\_of\\_race\\_whiteness\\_masculinities\\_and\\_Otherness\\_A\\_Critical\\_Race\\_study\\_of\\_mens\\_magazines\\_racialisation\\_and\\_athletic\\_bodies](https://www.academia.edu/4578807/On_white_mens_representations_of_race_whiteness_masculinities_and_Otherness_A_Critical_Race_study_of_mens_magazines_racialisation_and_athletic_bodies).

<sup>83</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in Association with the Open University, 1997), 231.

<sup>84</sup> Stuart Hall, "Kobena Mercer 'Reading Racial Fetishism'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in Association with the Open University, 1997), 289.

double slippage of shiny black skin with a glossy print surface that produced for a white readership (photographed by a white person). Although Sassen's photograph appeared in 2009, since then *Numero*, which enjoys representation in Tokyo, China, Thailand and Russia, and has been the subject of criticism about featuring white female models in *blackface* wearing Afros in 2010, and it came under fire in 2013 when a spread shot was titled "African Queen" in which the model Ondria Hardin from North Carolina who is white dressed up to represent the *African Queen*.<sup>85</sup>

A sheen of blackness is constructed in *Juice* (Figure 15). The photograph shows a boy who sits on a yellow bucket wearing an impeccable white collar shirt with khaki shorts, perhaps a standard school uniform. He is centered in a courtyard environment with stark, noontime light. Clothing lines surround the boy, though not in view, but their shadow is on the ground; some hanging clothing pieces enter the top of the photograph. Light reflecting through a green gel covers the boy's skin, producing an iridescent shine that toggles between black skin that fully absorbs the light and an iridescent green light that acts in a complex inflected reflection. Also in view is a shadow of a person that holds what I assume it is a color gel used in photography and film to control color temperature.

What is in play is the skin of the little boy. It is not concealed, but the viewer toggles between the way of seeing and how Sassen displays him. The boy is elsewhere, and his pedestal is a bucket. The gel that is used to filter the light on him is a play on his racial epidermal schema that stops the viewer concerning how the flesh is visible. The use of the gel supports the fantasy of the skin, but teases a negotiation between corporeality and covering. As shiny objects in a frame (or as

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<sup>85</sup> Julee Wilson, "Numéro Magazine 'African Queen' Editorial Uses White Model Ondria Hardin [UPDATE]," The Huffington Post, February 25, 2013, accessed March 18, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/25/numero-magazine-african-queen\\_n\\_2761374.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/25/numero-magazine-african-queen_n_2761374.html).

sculptures) should lead the eye around, the shine on the boy does not fulfill that dynamic. Instead, the viewer's vision is stuck on the boy only; it is the surface of his skin rather than the boy as a person or even a three dimensional form that assumes the attention of the viewer. This photograph I argue commodifies the boy as it takes from geographical imperialism appropriated into a contemporary artistic production. Our gaze onto the boy mirrors and fixes the production of a historical uncritical narrative as well as the interests that shapes it. What is on view is a western "reality" of alterity based on a template of ordering and normalizing utilizing the cannon of representing a commodity. On view is black skin that is used to create visibility for the photographer, and shine that function to make the black body invisible.

Thompson questions the space between hypervisibility and disappearance. Ultimately, representational politics in the contemporary moment of self-fashioning blackness and commodity engender not a point of visibility, but that this moment is also the "age of black hypervisibility".<sup>86</sup> Sassen's appropriation of the shiny surface of black skin brings to light that the visual saturation offers the same disappearance as the previous use of the shadow.

A photograph exists across the whole spectrum, encompassing everything at once. I am certain that images of the Other (at this moment) will always reinforce opposite binaries strengthening old stereotypes. Subsequent centuries, the politics of modernism befell the sub-Saharan continent and captured positions of power with modernist tools while numbers of peoples experienced devastating events whose effects are reinforced daily and permeate pictures and minds. Photographs that have arrived and are still produced as keepsakes or, as in the media, instantiate an already existing conceptual act and catalyze an already existing imagination. In

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<sup>86</sup> Krista Thompson, "The Sound of Light" Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," *The Art Bulletin* 91, no. 4 (December 2009): 501, accessed November 11, 2013.

Sassen's photographs, the skin of her models makes a historical backdrop visible, and the treatment of their skin is the signature of the photographer. The Other is the object of the commodification, and the treatment of the skin served the purpose to blind the former purchaser of slaves. Sassen's visual aesthetic and use of the blinged body tries to blind us. Production, reproduction and circulation of photography cannot escape what shaped any cultural past.

I began this paper to investigate the ontology of the shadow in photography, and accidentally stumbled upon the work of Viviane Sassen. Her images remind us that photography's history is intrinsically linked to the inscription and the sealant of race onto the skin. Coco Fusco examined in her exhibition *Only Skin Deep*<sup>87</sup> that photography's indexical capacity to fix and capture physical differences that has served historically as evidence how to see and look at race and its signifiers<sup>88</sup>. Photographic practices have been intrinsic to the racialization of the black body, and the imbrication of race and photography has petrified binary structures and cultural signifiers.

In the work of Viviane Sassen, the use of the shadow can be understood as a representation that mimics the social ideology, in which Sassen was raised; it perpetuates the reductive view of Africans that was familiar to justify and promoted colonialism in the first place. Embraced in her work is a romanticized view of her childhood stay in Africa that prefers to mystify and cannot engage in a critical manner. Presented are her "imagined" Africans whose authenticity is still needed to feed the West's imagination. Sassen's work is ambiguous as she employs the equatorial shadow in order to mystify the idea of her models. In light of

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<sup>87</sup> Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: International Center of Photography in Association with Harry N. Abrams, Publishers, 2003)

<sup>88</sup> Kristin Juarez and Christina Price Washington, "Dislodging the Visual: Yanique Norman's Amorphous Beings," <http://liquidblackness.com/issues/>, May 2014, accessed April 20, 2014.

photography, I have rendered the shadow to be unstable as the shadow is the interception of light making the factual imprint of the referent empty. Sassen's use of the shadow indicates that her images of the other inhabit a state of race and do not deliver the content and an image that can be understood as representational of her sitters.

It is difficult to let go of images we know; the photochemical fixed black body can be secured and read on the surface continuing to perpetuate binary structures thus fueling the photochemical imagination. Sassen's work delivers the black that has taught us to read the African race as black, and the viewer is not compelled to go past the surface. The western image of race is what is reflected in the shadow. It is the body rendered dark and opaque that photography has contained and does not fail to deliver this image; it is the reduction of the black body and the perpetuation of the idea that reflects between its sign and the black body.

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## APPENDICES



Figure 1. Viviane Sassen; *Kathleen*



Figure 2. Viviane Sassen; *Traveller*

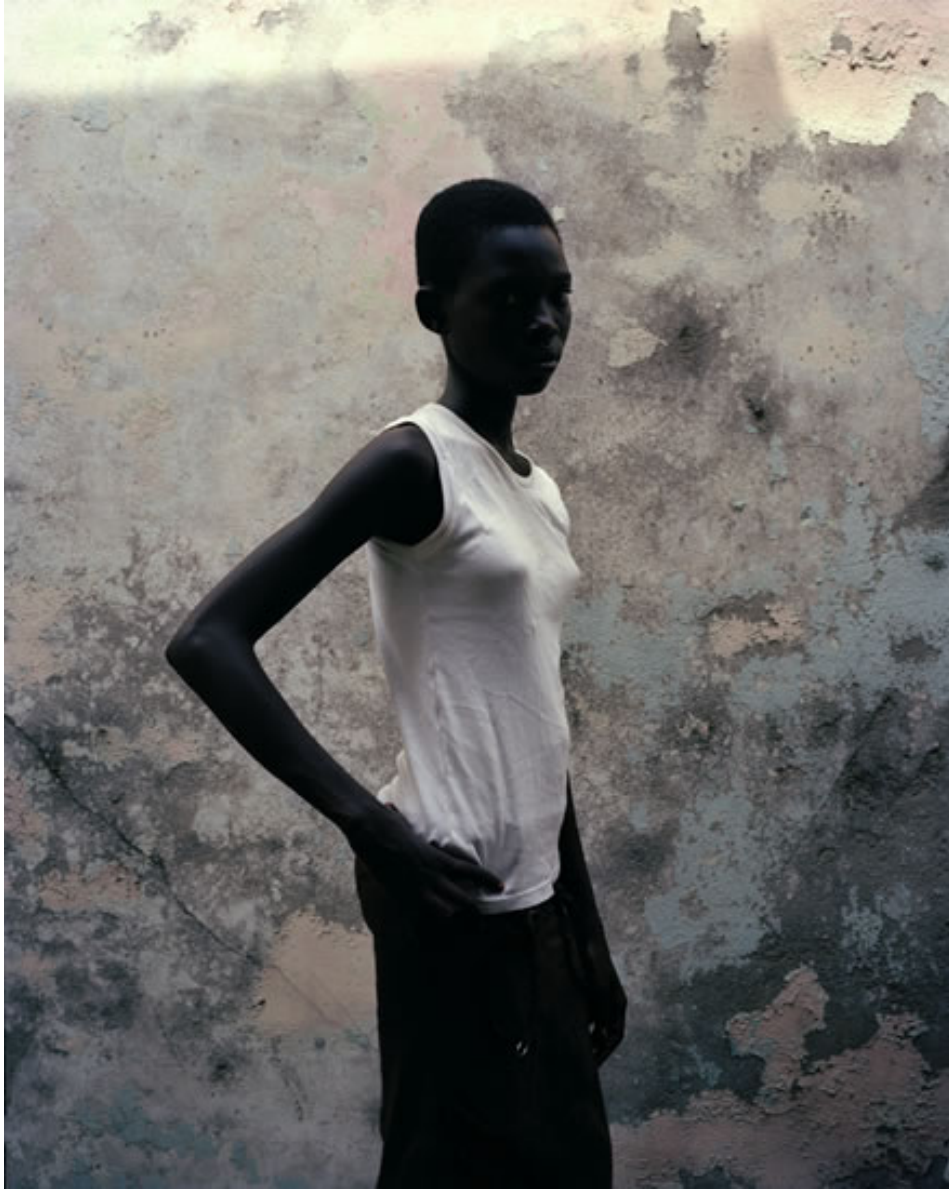


Figure 3. Viviane Sassen; *Faro*





Figure 4. Viviane Sassen; *Cardinal*





Figure 5. Viviane Sassen; *Spring of the Nile*



Figure 6. Viviane Sassen; *Shadow*



Figure 6. Viviane Sassen; *Shadow* - Horizontal Flip



Figure 8. Viviane Sassen; *Shadow* - Negative





Figure 9. Viviane Sassen; *Numerokinee3*



Figure 10. Hans Holbein the Younger; Painting *King Henry VIII*





Figure 11. Hans Holbein the Younger; *The Ambassadors*



Figure 12. Jean Leon Gerome; *Moorish Bath* 1870





Figure 13. John Singleton Copley; *Watson and the Shark* 1778



Figure 14. Dirk Valkenburg; *Negro Festival* 1706-1708



Figure 15. Viviane Sassen; *Juice*